DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 083 EC 302 708

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TITLE Bridging the Gap between Regular & Special Education: Adventure-Based Counseling for Students with Emotional Disturbances in Public Schools.
PUB DATE [92]
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; *Counseling Services; *Emotional Disturbances; *Group Experience; High Schools; Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; Junior High Schools; *Peer Relationship; Physical Activities; *Program Development; Program Implementation; Secondary School Students; Self Concept; Self Esteem; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Social Integration; Student Development
IDENTIFIERS *Riverside County Schools CA

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and implementation of an adventure-based counseling program with six groups of junior high and high school students having severe emotional disturbances in Riverside County, California. The program's objectives were: (1) to improve students' communication skills, self-confidence, trust, respect for others, and problem-solving techniques; (2) to help students experience the benefits of effective group cooperation through participation in challenging physical activities; and (3) to integrate regular and special education students into adventure groups and foster friendships. The paper describes the initial trial phase, the program preparation procedures (including staff development, arranging to provide a 6-hour Ropes Course experience for the students, and obtaining relevant insurance certification and parental consent forms). Actual implementation involved weekly adventure sessions of 60 to 90 minutes on school grounds, including a follow-up discussion of successes, failures, and feelings as well as 1 full-day Ropes Course experience. Specific modifications planned for the program's second year are identified, such as offering the program early in the school year, clarifying the teacher's role, and carefully integrating nonhandicapped students into the adventure groups. (Contains 21 references.) (DB)

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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN REGULAR & SPECIAL EDUCATION:

ADVENTURE-BASED COUNSELING FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Children with emotional disturbances (SED), by definition, have significant difficulties with alienation, antisocial behavior, lack of appropriate peer and adult relationships, and poor self-concept (Bower, 1981, Kauffman, 1989). They have social and emotional needs that remain largely unmet by the curricula traditionally utilized in the public school system (Knitzer. Steinberg and Fleisch, 1990). If such students are served at all on a regular school campus, they are generally segregated (both formally and informally) from their regular education peers (Walker, et al., 1988). School counselors and psychologists generally have a limited amount of time for counseling activities and many teachers feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped to adequately address their students' needs in these areas (Johnson, 1989). Emotionally disturbed students frequently do not respond well to traditional counseling methods (i.e., talk therapy)(Nelson and Pearson, 1991, p. 32); therefore, a more novel, stimulating, and active group counseling approach was worth exploring (Robb and Ewert, 1987; Sachs and Miller, 1992). Adventure-based counseling is just such an approach.

Adventure-based counseling can be defined as an action-oriented model which provides physically, emotionally, and intellectually challenging opportunities for persons to interact cooperatively and successfully

with their peers (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). It is an approach that has been powerful and effective in meeting the educational and mental health needs of students with emotional and social difficulties.

Objectives of the Adventure-Based Counseling Program are:

- to assist students in developing communication skills, self-confidence, trust, respect for others, and problem-solving techniques;
- to help students experience the benefits of effective group cooperation through participation in a variety of physical activities; and
- to integrate regular and special education students into adventure groups so that friendships and increased levels of understanding and acceptance can develop between these two often segregated groups.

These objectives, coupled with the unique needs of students with emotional and behavioral problems, were compelling reasons why the Riverside County Office of Education began to implement the Adventure-Based Counseling Program. The authors, birthparents of the program, received an intense experiential education of their own as they struggled to bring the program into existence. What follows is an accounting of this process and the lessons learned. It is hoped that this article may serve as a guide for others who wish to implement an adventure-based counseling program to serve both special and regular education populations in a public school setting.

Initial Phase

The initial phase required a group of high school students with serious emotional disturbances and their teachers to attend a one-day Ropes Course experience. The purpose of this phase was to assess how well adventure education would be received by students, staff, and parents.

It soon became clear that the adventure experience was a success. One teacher noted that it was the most positive experience her students had all year. Indeed, all of the students and teachers involved described the experience as highly enjoyable and worthwhile. In addition, closer, more trusting relationships were formed between students, teachers, and the school psychologist (one of the authors). As a result, a revised and expanded Adventure-Based Counseling Program was designed and in-creased levels of funding were obtained through a TUPE Grant (California Tobacco Use Prevention Education).

After searching relevant professional literature, two national program models were selected to serve as the core of the Riverside County Office of Education's expanded Adventure Education Program: ***Adventure Based Counseling*** (developed by Project Adventure, Inc., in Hamilton, Massachusetts) and, to a lesser extent, ***Project Explore*** (a program developed at Indiana University under the auspices of the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services).

Adventure Based Counseling is a well-defined and well-developed model presented in detail in Islands of Healing (Schoel et. al., 1988). Its approach was readily applicable to the needs of emotionally disturbed students in the public school. In addition, the Adventure Based Counseling Program utilized the major tenets of ***Project Explore*** as detailed in Robb & Leslie's publication, Explore: Alternative Learning Environments for Behavior Disordered Children (1987).

Program Preparation and Procedures

The program facilitator/school psychologist, already somewhat experienced in the field of adventure education, attended a five-day training in Adventure Based Counseling at Project Adventure, Inc., located in Hamilton, Massachusetts. After the training, eight key operational procedures were outlined as imperative for successful

implementation:

First, area Ropes Course options were explored and an agreement established with a local YMCA camp to provide a six-hour Ropes Course experience for each of the six student adventure groups, as well as one day for staff training.

Second, adventure education literature was searched in order to create an "adventure base" of suitable and portable activities for on-campus adventure sessions. Numerous supplies and props were subsequently purchased and assembled.

Third, an overnight staff orientation and training session was held at the YMCA Camp. The training was co-facilitated by YMCA staff and the Adventure Program facilitator. Focus of the training was to provide groundwork for the theory and practice of adventure-based counseling, as well as counseling and adventure skills experience. Each teacher was provided with a set of adventure reference texts: ***Silver Bullets, Islands of Healing, Cowstails*** and ***Cobras II.*** Finally, prior to beginning the program, the facilitator met with each teacher to develop the initial week's goals and focus, and to plan activities for the group.

Fourth, the Riverside County Office of Education's risk management officer and assistant superintendent were consulted regarding safety and liability, and informed of consent issues. Group accident insurance was obtained to cover all groups while participating in the Ropes Course experience. Parent letters and release forms were written and approved.

Fifth, directors of special education and school principals in each of the area's school districts were contacted in order to obtain necessary clearances to integrate regular education students into the adventure groups.

Sixth, letters with accompanying program descriptions and

consent forms were mailed to the special education students' parents/guardians.

Seventh, regular education counselors at each school site were approached for referrals to the adventure group, and/or the special education teacher and program facilitator was scheduled to speak to regular education student groups in order to recruit volunteers for the Adventure Program. (For example: special classes for at-risk students, student councils, etc.) Parent information and consent packets were sent home with each regular education student volunteer.

Eighth, transportation options were explored for the Ropes Course outings. Riverside County Office of Education station wagons were utilized because the cost of hiring school buses was deemed too expensive.

This eight-step approach was a process the authors believe essential for successful implementation of the program. School districts, county schools or agencies may choose to vary the procedure to meet the needs and expectations of their particular students or clients.

Phase Two: Implementation

The Adventure-Based Counseling Program was implemented on a whole-class basis including teachers and instructional aides. While it is hoped that the program will be expanded to include all middle and senior high school programs for emotionally disturbed students in the county, as well as other at-risk school populations (e.g., court referred youth, chemically dependent students), the initial phase of implementation was restricted to six classes. Students from four of these classes were integrated with a number of regular education students from their individual campus sites. In this way, it was hoped that the groups would be more heterogeneous, balanced, and successful than if they

were composed entirely of emotionally disturbed students. However, two of the classes were so large that there was no room for incorporating regular education students from the campus. Together, these dozen or so students, along with the teacher, instructional aide, and school psychologist, formed the school's adventure group.

The adventure groups met on a weekly basis over the course of two months. All but one of the sessions were held on school grounds during the school day and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (i.e., one to two class periods). Each week the group would gather in an out-of-the way corner of the campus, usually an unused field, and begin the session with a sit-down briefing of the day's planned activities and a short review of the group's prior session. The group would then participate in a series of two to four adventure activities, concluding with a sit-down debriefing, where successes, failures, feelings, and thoughts (in terms of the activities just experienced) were discussed. After completing several on-campus sessions, each group spent a full day working through a Challenge Ropes Course at a YMCA camp in the local mountains. YMCA staff co-facilitated the group and assumed primary responsibility for safety and technical expertise.

Phase Three: Evaluation

While a program evaluation component was considered an important aspect in order to assess effectiveness in meeting program objectives, several logistical concerns prevented implementation during the first year. Nonetheless, a great deal of preparatory time and energy was devoted to the design of an effective evaluation component. Research has shown that similar adventure-based counseling programs have led to significant and consistent improvement in children's self-concept, sense of competence, and trust (Schoel,1988). Therefore, the following evaluation process is suggested:

Once the adventure groups are formed, administer pre- and post-test measures of the students' self-concept, social skills, and overall behavior. A similarly composed control group should be selected and assessed for comparison purposes. Evaluate input from parents, teachers, and students via a standardized assessment device. Because they are easy to administer, score, and interpret, the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE) chose the Behavior Rating Profile-2 (Brown & Hammill), the Self-Esteem Index (Brown & Alexander), the Waksman Social Skills Rating Scale (Waksman), and a Classroom Environment Survey developed by the authors.

RCOE plans to use the outlined evaluation process not only to measure the efficacy of the program, but the utility of the RCOE approach. Since this is a new program for special education students, social validation (e.g., "It was great fun." "I've noticed many positive changes in my students.") plus empirical evidence will strengthen further support.

Program Modifications

As the Adventure Program begins its second year, several modifications will be implemented as a result of lessons learned during its infancy.

- The Adventure Program needs to start within the first few weeks of the school year rather than during the final weeks, when self-defeating behaviors and unhealthy relationships are firmly entrenched.
- The teacher's role as adventure co-leader needs to be clearly defined as distinct from the program facilitator. During the rest of the week, lessons learned during the adventure sessions need to be reinforced and restated to the greatest extent possible.
- The Adventure Program needs to have the full support and partici-

pation of the classroom staff and administration if it is to be successful. If this support is not present (e.g., teachers view the sessions as their free time; administrators consider it an unimportant added expense), then the program will likely fail.

- The adventure group must have several weeks of on-campus work prior to the Ropes Course experience. Due to transportation limitations, some of the adventure groups were required to go to the course after only a couple of sessions. These groups experienced much less success than those who went to the mountains near the end of the Adventure Program; they were unprepared for many of the more challenging elements of the Ropes Course.
- Regular education students must be integrated into adventure groups and they must be a carefully balanced group (e.g., a few at-risk students with behavior problems, a few student leaders who can serve as role models). Those groups consisting of only emotionally disturbed students experienced little success. It proved exceedingly difficult to break their maladaptive behavior patterns without positive peer influence and interaction. Likewise, in one of the integrated groups, a contingent of eight highly disruptive regular education students (from a special class for students at-risk of being expelled) completely overwhelmed the smaller number of emotionally disturbed students and dominated the group.
- The number of adventure groups (six) was too large for one staff person to facilitate while maintaining other full-time responsibilities, such as those of a school psychologist. The amount of time required for adequate planning and preparation of each week's adventure activities, in addition to the actual time spent with the adventure groups, constituted a significant portion of the work week. Two or, perhaps, three adventure groups running concurrently is likely to be a more appropriate number, assuming a caseload that is otherwise

reasonable.

- Despite the rich supply of assessment data available via the assessment process outlined in Phase Three (preceding), this process proved to be too time-intensive and cumbersome; it needed to be streamlined. The amended battery of measures includes the Behavior Rating Profile-2 (with teacher, parent, and student forms) and the Classroom Environment Survey.
- Although the availability of free transportation to the YMCA camp via county office station wagons allowed for significant cost savings, splitting the group and staff into two crowded vehicles was stressful, uncomfortable, and occasionally unsafe. Bus rental may well be worth the additional cost.
- The difference in responsiveness to the program between junior and senior high students was remarkable. The shorter attention span and higher energy level of the middle school groups created significant difficulties for the facilitator in terms of keeping the group focused on the activity at hand, particularly those requiring a slower, more thoughtful approach. Future programming must take this difference into account.

Conclusions

Students with severe emotional disturbances, by definition, have significant difficulties with alienation, antisocial behavior, lack of appropriate peer and adult relationships, and poor self-concept. As such, they are at significantly increased risk for a wide variety of current and future difficulties. Furthermore, these students often have significant social and emotional needs that remain largely unmet by the curricula and services currently available to them in the public school system. Research indicates that students with severe behavioral problems are social isolates in regular education classrooms (Gaylord-

Ross & Halvoet, 1985). They are labelled as troublemakers and/or underachievers and are removed from the mainstream where, unfortunately, their behavior tends to worsen. Providing an opportunity for regular and special education students to develop appropriate peer relationships, learn positive interdependence, and appreciate each other's differences, increases the likelihood that SED can participate and remain in regular education environments.

The aforementioned is a difficult task. However, the Riverside County Office of Education Adventure-Based Counseling Program has shown itself to be an effective alternative model that can supplement more traditional curricula and assist behaviorally disordered students in developing improved social skills, self-esteem, decision-making and problem-solving skills. It also, unequivocally, helped establish new friendships between regular and special education students. It is those friendships that break down barriers often artificially constructed in schools that segregate students with diverse learning needs.

Similarly, the Adventure-Based Counseling Program provided a much needed, powerful, and fun, counseling component for the public schools in Riverside County. The Riverside County Office of Education Adventure-Based Counseling Program may serve as a model program as more and more educational agencies search for effective alternatives to traditional curricula and vehicles for integrating SED into the mainstream.

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